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ESSAY

William Safire

Saigon
And
Managua

WASHINGTON

The remarkable thing about the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon is this: We celebrate the occasion by deciding whether or not to heed its lesson in Central America. The basic difference between the President and the Congress is about what that lesson was.

If you believe that Vietnam was an exercise in American imperialism, doomed from the start and needlessly prolonged, then you come down on the side of the Democratic leadership in Congress: You equate the contras with the "corrupt dictatorship in Saigon" and refuse them the guns they need to defeat their Communist enemies.

Contrariwise, if you believe that our attempt to save South Vietnam from Communist takeover was nobly motivated, and failed only because a defeatist media and Watergate-emboldened doves in Congress were able to strip South Vietnam of our protection, then you stand with President Reagan: You see the Managua Communists as the puppets of Havana and Moscow, and you are eager to supply the contras with the ammunition needed to help the anti-Communist Nicaraguans bring down the Moscow-backed regime.

That is looking at the issue in its starkest terms. Let us grant that there are shades of gray that doves and hawks do not like to think about.

For example, there must be plenty of doves who derided talk 10 years ago of incipient "blood baths," and who sincerely believed that life would be better for the people of Southeast Asia after our involvement was ended, who now feel a personal guilt for the genocide that followed. Not for them the easy out of the Shawcross Theory, which turns truth on its head and blames the Americans for somehow transforming the gentle Khmer Rouge into murderers of defenseless millions.

For an example on the other side, I know there are hawks who cannot go along with Mr. Nixon's judgment that Congress alone was the cause of Saigon's downfall; we think that Congress did not help, but that the South Vietnamese Government did not have the stamina to withstand for long the continual pressure from the North.

But mind-sets on which great decisions turn do not lend themselves to shades of gray. Therefore, doves do not concern themselves with the fact that this Communist threat is near our borders, within our sphere of influence, and not half a world away; nor do hawks trouble themselves that our vigorous response to the export of revolution is surely an attempt to help overthrow a Government in place, and not, as in Vietnam a decade ago, to prevent its overthrow. Those are debating points, and such points do not decide great debates.

What does determine whether American foreign policy leans toward isolation or leans toward intervention? Where is the handle on whose version of the lesson of Vietnam shall prevail in Central America?

1. *Stridency is a loser.* Shrillness in advocacy turns the general public off. The dove's attacks on the contras as fascist thugs, or their mean-spirited charge that Mr. Reagan is spoiling to use U.S. troops in a good little war, will present the hawks with a target of extremist America-haters. In the same way, the President's elevation of the anti-Communists to the "moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers" invites mockery; more important, the misuse of the F.B.I. by the C.I.A. to harass U.S. citizens returning from Nicaragua will turn public opinion against the hawks.

2. *Presidential priority is a winner.* A recently elected President who considers this issue to be of utmost importance can bring even an opposition Congress along. In November 1969

Richard Nixon mobilized the "silent majority" in a television speech that knocked the doves back for years; later he let the Soviet leader know that Vietnam had priority over summit chances.

Mr. Reagan is unwilling to expend political capital on what is said to be a losing vote. That means he does not consider this sufficiently important, or it means he is fearful of legislative defeat. A radio spot on the eve of a great decision is a joke; better to lose than to run from a fight. Instead, the President will come before us to plead for a cut in domestic spending, and triumphant isolationists will send a few bandages to the contras through the U.N.

Let the vote be recorded, and let the President consider recovering by recognizing a Nicaraguan government-in-exile. This vote goes far beyond a rebuff to the contras: It is each Congressman's expression of his understanding of the lesson of Vietnam. □